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FILE ONLY

ESPIONAGE SUSPECT IS LINKED TO KLAN

Organization's Ex-Leader Tells of Friendship in Navy With Man Held as Soviet Spy

By STEPHEN ENGELBERG*Special to The New York Times*

WASHINGTON, May 31 — A former Ku Klux Klan leader said today that he and John A. Walker Jr., accused last week of spying for the Soviet Union, became close friends while serving together aboard a nuclear submarine.

The man, Bill Wilkinson, once the Imperial Wizard of the Invisible Empire, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, said that Mr. Walker had never tried to recruit him or use his Klan contacts for any espionage operation.

"I felt like he was a patriot," said Mr. Wilkinson in a telephone interview from his home in Denham Springs, La. "I can recall cussing commies with him."

Radio Show Appearance

Mr. Wilkinson refused to say whether Mr. Walker was a Klan member. In 1980, according to the Anti-Defamation League of the B'nai B'rith, Mr. Walker described himself on a radio call-in show as state director of the Klan in Virginia.

Mr. Walker's ties to the Klan were the latest twist in the widening spy case. Mr. Walker's brother and son have also been arrested and several of his business associates are under investigation.

Mr. Walker, a former Navy warrant officer who ran a private detective agency in Virginia Beach, Va., has been accused of passing sensitive documents to the Russians for up to 18 years. He has been described by neighbors and the authorities as an electronics aficionado who used a variety of disguises in his work.

Mr. Wilkinson said that after they served together on the submarine Simon Bolivar in the mid-1960's, he had kept in contact with Mr. Walker and saw him as recently as a year ago at the Baton Rouge Airport. He expressed shock at the espionage charges and said if Mr. Walker is guilty, "they ought to shoot him at sunrise."

Drive by Klan in Norfolk

The Anti-Defamation League said today that Mr. Walker apparently participated five years ago in a drive to recruit Klan members among Navy personnel in the Norfolk, Va., area.

Irwin Suall, fact-finding director of the Anti-Defamation League, said that a man identifying himself as "John" appeared on a radio call-in show in Norfolk in 1980 and called himself the Virginia state director of the Klan. He invited listeners to join the Klan by writing to a post office box, which was listed by postal authorities as being held by John A. Walker Jr.

On the radio call-in show, "John" said he had served with Mr. Wilkinson in the Navy.

According to an Anti-Defamation League account of the incident, "John" said that Jews cannot belong to the Klan because "they owe allegiance to a foreign government."

According to the Anti-Defamation League, the January 1980 and January 1981 issues of the Klansman magazine say that the group's Virginia director can be reached by writing to P.O. Box 8001, the box rented by Mr. Walker.

Klan Recruiting in Navy

At the time, Norfolk was experiencing an upsurge in Klan activity. Mr. Wilkinson had come to Virginia Beach in October 1979 for a rally, and the Atlantic Fleet, headquartered in Norfolk, reported that several sailors had donned the white robes of the Klan.

Mr. Wilkinson would not discuss any Klan activities of Mr. Walker, citing the organization's prohibition against revealing a person's membership without his permission.

Five years ago, when Mr. Wilkinson headed the group, the Invisible Empire was considered among the most heavily armed of the Klan groups in the South.

Mr. Wilkinson described Mr. Walker as a conscientious sailor who worked hard to advance himself in the Navy. He said Mr. Walker took correspondence courses to improve his knowledge.

Both men held the title of radio men and had "top secret cryptographic" clearances. Aboard the submarine, this classification was restricted to radio operators and the ship's top officers, Mr. Wilkinson said.

'I Envied Him'

Navy records show that Mr. Walker was aboard the Simon Bolivar as a radioman from August 1965 to April of 1967. One month before he left that submarine, he was promoted to warrant officer.

A Navy spokesman said today that the records of Mr. Wilkinson's service could not be immediately located.

The two met in Newport News, Va., when the Navy was pulling together its first crew for the Simon Bolivar. They were involved with the installation of equipment aboard the submarine, and they participated in its first cruises. Both left the ship for other assignments in 1967.

Mr. Wilkinson recalls that Mr. Walker saw himself as something of a "playboy" who would go for a drive in his sports car with a British cap perched jauntily on his head.

"I admired him, I envied him," said Mr. Wilkinson. "He had a little MG convertible. Boy, he had it all."